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ENGLISH WOMEN AS A POLITICAL FORCE.

THE origin, rise, and progress of the Primrose League has been already too amply given to necessitate repetition. My province is simply to touch on the part taken by the ladies of the League in this great political organization. I believe I am not wrong in saying that it is to a certain degree a social revolution, for it is the first time in England that women have taken an open and avowed part in political movement and have been recognized as political agents. The Primrose League, as is well known, was founded by a few gentlemen, of whom Lord Randolph Churchill, Rt. Hon. Sir H. Drummond Wolff, Sir John Gore, Sir Algernon Borthwick, and Colonel Burnaby were amongst the earliest members. The first meetings were held in a small second-floor room in Essex street, Strand, where the ten original founders met constantly for discussion, and were soon joined by others.

A few paragraphs in the newspapers awakened public curiosity, and adherents speedily sent in their names. Not many weeks had elapsed when some hundred persons had joined, and the work of forming clubs or habitations was begun; hundreds soon became thousands, and a large public demonstration was held with unprecedented success in Free Mason's Tavern. Since that day the League has steadily increased, and has now attained its present gigantic proportions. It numbers now close upon six hundred thousand members and nearly thirteen hundred habitations.

The aim and object of this new society was, first, the maintenance of religion, law, order, and the integrity of the Empire; secondly, to encourage voluntary canvass at the time of elections; thirdly, the establishment of habitations or clubs all over the Kingdom, which should hold meetings and elect members for the furtherance of those principles; fourthly, a strict inquiry into the registration of all Conservative voters.

The Primrose League had already been started two years when a prominent member expressed a wish that Lady Wimborne and the writer of this article should call together a committee of ladies, and enroll them as members with power to act on the part of the League. After some consideration, this was done, and the first committee was held on the 2d of March, 1885, at 139 Piccadilly.

“ At which meeting it was resolved to form a ladies’ branch of the League, composed of the following ladies, who each guaranteed to subscribe an annual sum toward the funds of the League, viz.:

Lady Borthwick (in the chair),	Julia, Countess of Jersey,
The Duchess of Marlborough,	Mrs. Hardman,
Lady Wimborne,	Lady Dorothy Nevill,
Lady Randolph Churchill,	Miss Nevill,
Lady Charles Beresford,	Lady Campbell (of Blythswood),
Dow. March’s of Waterford,	Hon. Mrs. Armytage,
Julia, March’s of Tweedale,	Mrs. Bischoffsheim.”

Meetings were at once held, often two and three times a week, and much attentive work was required for the drawing out of the rules, which till then had never been written ; but good will was shown, as well as steady application, and at the end of a few weeks the new branch made rapid progress.

Members from all classes joined. Many of the great employers of labor gave powerful aid, and now at this moment no less than 106 habitations have been founded by the Dames of the League, some of them numbering from two to six hundred persons in a club or habitation. An Executive Council was then formed, of which the Duchess of Marlborough became Acting President. Six officials, viz., three Presidents, the Duchess of Marlborough, Marchioness of Salisbury, and Countess Idlesleigh, and three Vice-Presidents, Lady Wimborne, Lady Borthwick, and Baroness Bolsover, were elected for life. A Grand Council was formed, with the right of voting. Since March, 1885, the League has numbered 1,043 Dames of the Grand Council, and 34,400 Dames of the League. These numbers are constantly increasing, and during the late elections sometimes as many as 2,000 male and female members joined in a day.

The work of the ladies was of an intricate description, that of forming clubs or habitations, each of which should be composed of a president, vice-president, secretary, dames, and associates:

They had in each district to find places where such clubs might meet for discussion and work. The next important question was that of the literature to be dispensed at such habitations, and a separate committee was formed for the purpose of editing and publishing the leaflets. As the ladies' branch rapidly increased, so did also their financial prosperity, and two ladies were appointed, Lady Gwendoline Cecil and Lady Hardman, as treasurer and secretary of the committee. It would be difficult to enumerate all the many services rendered by the women of the League, but it will give some idea of how well they have worked, when I say that no fewer than 371 clasps have been conferred for special services. These are only given for some unusual amount of work. There have also been 53 orders of merit awarded. One among many cases of work and discipline I must name, as it came under my special notice. During the time of the second election for South Kensington, a Radical candidate was started five days before going to the poll. The time being so short, there was some difficulty in getting out the voting papers. At once some 80 or 100 ladies enrolled themselves, and so admirably, so steadily, so efficiently did they work, that in less than 24 hours 10,000 voting cards were written, directed, stamped and posted. This is one of many examples of the united work of the League. Among those whose names may be mentioned, as having helped greatly to further the cause, should be named Lady Wimborne, who has started numbers of habitations; Lady Campbell of Blythswood, who started seven habitations in three months in Scotland, and turned out a Radical who had started in Renfrewshire.

Miss Nevill, who worked most efficiently in personally canvassing east and west St. Pancras, and drove about for days in taking voters to the poll. The Hon. Mary Henniker founded 13 habitations in Suffolk, and framed the by-laws to suit each locality. Lady Bolsonn, Lady Pembroke, and Lady Jersey have also been most successful in their efforts. But it would be impossible here to mention all the valuable work performed by the ladies of the League and carried out by their undaunted perseverance, courage, and energy. I cannot resist quoting a few lines from the address of Mrs. Fawcett to the students of Bedford College, last November, who, though opposed in politics, has given a most generous commendation, to the women of the League.

“It is an undeniable fact that the Primrose League has done more to give women the position which has been so long and so rigidly withheld than any other organization in this or any period of the world’s history. The originators of the movement showed their judgment and discrimination when they included women in their ranks, and, so far, I do not think there is one who has betrayed the confidence reposed in her by showing that she in any way merits the legal stigma of being classed with lunatics and that ilk. It is an admitted fact, by friend and foe, that the Primrose League throughout the length and breadth of the land has rendered the organized help of women in such a way as no help has ever been given before at Parliamentary or municipal elections. It has been the frank and universal admission of successful Conservative candidates that they have been lifted into Parliament by the Primrose League.”

I fully believe that a wide future is opening to women. As yet their capacity has been to a great degree untried ; they have proved themselves to be endued with quick perception, foresight, energy ; we know they have shown a great power of devotion, of unselfishness, of patience under suffering, of calm courage in danger. We know them to be at once to be the good and bad angels of the opposite sex, capable alike of inciting them to higher aims, noble ambition, and lofty aspirations, as they are alike capable of ruining them by their demoralizing influence. That woman’s power is unbounded, is undeniable. It has been shown in every great movement, religious or political, since the world began. Let that influence be turned to some good account. But to make noble women, you must give them responsibility; they must feel they have a place in the universe, that their actions are important, that their word is sacred, that they stand before the world not as mere irresponsible puppets, but as rational human beings, capable of good and evil, both in themselves and in influencing others.

I believe that the great faults attributed to woman are the faults rather of education and of public opinion than of nature. Had she a more recognized and important position, I fully believe that the trivialities, the petty jealousies, the spitefulness, the scandalmongering, the untruthfulness, would all disappear before the serious work of life.

But while we give to woman the place that is fully her due, let us not run to the other extreme. Let her not try to emulate

man in the many qualities he alone possesses ; let her rather try to excel as woman in all that is most feminine and womanly. Woman was created to be the complement of man's stronger qualities, not the rival of his intellect. Their very contrast should make their strength. Neither is complete without the other. Let us then work, not only for the good cause, but for the education of our own better nature.

“ Woman's mind, and special gifts, and ways
Should ever join with man's to solve the problems of our days.”

ALICE B. BORTHWICK.